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# From Adaptation to Standardization: The Positive Cycle of Cross-Culturally Customized Communication

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Mauro Cavallone

This work is based upon the findings of de Mooij (2005), Okazaki (2007), Cavallone (2007; 2012), Michiels (2010), and Reinoza (2011) related to the concepts of adaptation versus standardization and culturally and cross-culturally customized communication. It considers the theoretical constructs associated with these ideas, specifically focusing on the communication of Italian companies in foreign markets.

This research takes a step forward with empirical assessment of the perceptions and experiences of potential American consumers of Italian products in contrast to a corresponding target market of Italian nationals in Italy. The objective is to identify cultural convergences and divergences

emerging from the analysis of commercial advertising in the American media by testing their efficacy and comparing the acceptances among similar targets residing in different countries.

The article falls within the adaptation versus standardization debate and emphasizes the importance of the former, both from the point of view of satisfying technical needs and from the cultural and cross-cultural standpoint. The research hypotheses are linked to the desire to discover how an advertising message created for a certain country is perceived by different ethnic groups and how cultural aspects influence this perception. Those elements in the different communications that are not culturally acceptable and those that encourage acceptance have been pinpointed.

Beginning with a review and update of the recent literature on the subject, the article continues with a description of the

method proposed and adopted for the empirical analysis and a presentation of the results that emerged and led to the confirmation of the majority of theoretical assumptions initially made.

From an operative point of view, focus groups were conducted with Americans and Italians who were shown commercials that had been broadcast in the U.S. by Italian companies. The results, of efforts to pinpoint and isolate the factors that were modified compared with the “in country” communication that made the commercials either culturally customized (acceptable to the Americans) or cross-culturally customized (acceptable at the same time to both the ethnic groups), formed the subject of the analysis.

Finally, the article concludes with the implications for management and with the proposed steps to be taken for further development of the research.

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## Review of Recent Literature

For some time, international literature has dealt with the afore-mentioned diatribe. Elinder (1961) was the first to enquire into adapting the lever of communication, a subject that was then investigated by Elinder (1961,1965), Roostal (1963), Fatt (1964), and Buzell (1968). Globalization has continued to add fresh fuel to the debate and led several authors to highlight the benefits of standardization (Agrawal, 1995; Belch, 1998; Chan, Li, Diehl, & Terlutter, 2007; Hite & Frazer, 1988; Levitt, 1983). On one hand, Chan et al. (2007) point out,

[m]any marketers all over the world believe that consumers around the world have similar needs and desires and that the global market is becoming homogeneous.

On the other, scholars such as Usunier (1990) and Vardar (1992) have highlighted the low level efficacy of this option, especially when it is compared with the cultural factor (Walliser & Usunier, 1998). As Vrontis (1999) states, the latter variable represents a significant restraint and is the most difficult to control. This position is confirmed by Jain (1996) and Chan et al. (2007) who underline in particular the need to personalize

advertising messages, bearing in mind the culture of the public to whom they are directed. What emerges from the literature is the conviction that “[b]oth processes, internationalization and globalization, coexist” (Dicken, 1998: 5) and the certainty that, of the various factors that can orient management toward the adaptation of the marketing mix and, in particular, of communication, culture plays a leading role (Solberg, 2002). To this must be added the fact that advertising, in general, international communication, and the relationship between them and culture, have been the object of studies and debates in the literature<sup>1</sup> for some time and represent the second theoretical assumption of this research. From the analysis of these works, two vectors emerge in particular: the first is the focus, as reported by Okazaki (2007), on the concept of “cultural values.” As far as the concept of values is concerned, the main references that have inspired the majority of literature on cross-cultural communication lead back to Rokeach (1968; 1973), Kahle and Timmer (1983), and McCarty (1994). In recent years, increased attention has been given to the cultural variable in academic spheres (De Mooij & Hofstede, 2011; Donoho, Hersche, & Swenson, 2003; Kropp et al., 2000) although it was contemplated for a long time.

In 1968, Rokeach defines the values as lasting convictions as a way to conduct our existence; they are elements that bring forth, in their turn, opinions and desires. The same author in 1973 distinguishes between two levels of values: terminal and instrumental. The first are desirable “final states,” for example, a comfortable lifestyle, a sense of fulfillment, peace in the world, equality, and security. The second are desirable “instruments of conduct,” such as ambition, open-mindedness, ability, that enable the previously considered final states to be attained. Subsequently, Kahle and Timmer (1983) put forward a different concept of values, the so-called list of values (LOV), consisting of nine components. Given that each individual has a unique set of values, some represent the foundations of a culture, which tend to permeate the same (McCarty, 1994) and, therefore, they set themselves apart from personal values. Such cultural values are transmitted by a variety of sources (family, media, school, church, and state) and tend to be general, long-lasting, and relatively stable. (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 1998). Research on the subject of cultural values has also been extended to include the impact of the same on consumer behavior (Dawar & Parker, 1994; Kahle, 2000; Steenkamp & Baumgartner, 1998). Starting from this

course of enquiries, Limon, Kahale, & Orth (2009) propose a different classification, dividing them into internal, external, and fun and enjoyment values.<sup>2</sup> On this subject, McCracken (1986) investigates the relationship between values and brand, and Kim (2006) underlines the importance of the first as drivers to stimulate brand attachment if the brand reflects the consumers' values. According to Okazaki (2007), it is also possible to classify the cross cultural marketing studies dealing with the cultural dimension into three categories on the basis of the reference approach: Hofstede's cultural dimensions, Schwartz's cultural values, and the GLOBE study. Hofstede refers to four manifestations that identify culture: values, heroes, symbols, and rituals (which were used as the basis for the comparison of the commercials carried out by the focus groups) and four dimensions used to classify the countries: distance from power, collectivism vs. individualism, masculinity vs. femininity, aversion to uncertainty. To these dimensions, the current study follows Bond (1988) and adds a fifth: orientation toward the long-term or the short-term in the choices of life. Schwartz (1992; 1994) provided a second type of cultural value. The current study distinguishes three categories of basic social problems: the relationship between individual and group,

ensuring a socially responsible behavior, and the role of man compared with nature and with society. Cultural adaptation to solve each of these problems leads to Schwartz's seven dimensions of culture. Finally, mention must be made of the work of House and Hanges (2004), defined as the Globe Project, which pinpoints nine dimensions of culture and puts forward the distinction between cultural values and practices. In other words, they stigmatize the difference between what "should be," in other words cultural values (or artificial values) and that which "is," in other words cultural practices (or exposed values). Zou (2005) also carried out a census of cross-cultural marketing studies, classifying them according to different criteria including: the "standardization-localization" debate, consumers' reactions to advertising, the contents of advertising, social and normative elements, cultural values, topics relative to integrated marketing communication, international advertising agencies, and the management of advertising campaigns. The previously investigated topic of adaptation vs. standardization plays a central role in cross-cultural marketing studies, as Reinoza (2011) also points out. According to Michiels (2010), the ideal approach is to adapt the communication in a way that is coherent with local culture, an option that is confirmed and supported by

the majority of researchers (Britt, 1974; Kanso, 1992; Rutigliano, 1986).

## Research Hypotheses

An empirical assessment was considered useful using the model developed by Cavallone (2007; 2012) showing the paths of marketing communication development that can become culturally or cross-culturally customized. This communicative personalization may occur when the various cultures are studied in-depth, the differences are exploited and the threats are transformed into opportunities. The desire to move from a "culture free" type of communication (Cuomo, 2006) to a "culture bound" one (Herbig, 2003) has encouraged the author to assume a more personalized advertising method based not only upon the technical needs, but also on the cultural needs of consumers belonging to different ethnic groups. This theory originates from Hofstede's classification of the constituting elements to reach the identification of two types of communication, i.e., "culturally" and cross culturally "customized," that differ from "translation only" and from adaptation in the strictest sense (1991). Hofstede distinguishes four manifestations of culture: symbols, heroes, rituals, and values.

**Symbols** are "the words, gestures and images to which

a specific meaning is attributed that is only clear to those who share the same culture,” (Hofstede, 1991) as if they were codes (for example, the words of a language or of a particular jargon, clothes, hairstyles, status symbols, or individual products like Coca-Cola or Nike runners). These symbols are also easily identifiable by those who do not have the same cultural background.

**Heroes** are represented by people (sometimes only imaginary) who are noticeable and recognisable (e.g., a football player, a singer, an actor) for a specific society, and who, therefore, become models of behavior for its members.

**Rituals** are defined as “collective activities considered socially essential in a culture; examples include the manner in which one greets others (timeliness, warmth, distance), consideration for one’s fellow-men, or the various behaviors linked to social moments or religious practices,” (Hofstede, 1991).

**Values** are set at the center of culture and are defined by Rokeach (1973) as “permanent convictions which [sic] lead a person to choose between one way of behaving and another.”

These markers become the structure used to analyze the acceptability of the commercials analyzed by the different targets taken into consideration. All the variables of marketing mix undergo changes and adaptations and

are rethought or reconsidered from the point of view of a cultural “fit.” In particular, the marketing approaches of different companies were analyzed in order to verify if the messages were simply translated (into foreign languages) or were customized or culturally adapted. As far as standardization is concerned, “translation only” campaigns can be considered part of the first cluster. The advertisement has a standard structure based upon the presentation of a single message translated into different languages.

The advantage of this approach is that it is inexpensive to create and needs only to be translated into another language (preferably by native speakers living in the target countries to avoid using obsolete or confusing language). As for adaptation, the path of culturally customized communication leads to a specific personalization of the message on the basis of the cultures present in the market. Such a personalization is cultural and not cross-cultural and targets a given niche but does not exploit common elements of other cultures present except by default (Table 1).

The various targets are considered in this way and subdivided into those referring to the residents of the foreign country and those for the residents of the country of origin. The process is described as follows. Supposing the culture of the

target resident in the foreign country is characterized by displays “a,” “b,” “c,” and “d” and that of the residents of the target country of origin by the expressions “a,” “z,” “v,” and “d.” It is already clear that “a” and “d” are common to the two cultural groups. A first hypothesis of communication(s) turns to the two targets and is linked to the idea of an undifferentiated A message is put into effect without borrowing anything particular from cultural spheres. Such options, which can be linked back to mass marketing, try for the most part to “push for a ‘media’ communication—which, therefore, somewhat pleases and displeases everybody—defining a wider covering specter of consumer demands and preferences” (Mattiacci, 2000). With this kind of message, the company can communicate to its target the benefits of the offer, highlighting the characteristics of the merchandise rather than the economic advantages.

Alternatively, a cultural customization of communications can be implemented, declining it in the two versions A1 and A2, that are brought about on the basis of the manifestations of culture characterizing and distinguishing the two public objectives. This is equal to saying that expressions “b” and “c” concern residents in the foreign country and “z” and “v” residents in the country of origin. This

**Table 1**  
**The Matrix of Culturally Customized Communications (Adapted by Cavallone, 2007)**

	Undifferentiated Message	Culturally Customized Message
Residents in the foreign country (Cultural manifestations: “a,” “b,” “c,” “d”)	A	$A1 = f(\text{“b,” “c”})$
Residents in the country of origin (Cultural manifestations: “a,” “z,” “v,” “d”)	A	$A2 = f(\text{“z,” “v”})$

method, which may seem limited and obsolete if a heterogeneous and multicultural audience is considered, represents the practice adopted until recently for the creation of advertising campaigns. Such a method refers back to classic “in country” communication in which cultural personalization is linked to values present in the residents of the foreign country, or the same communication is personalized in a “foreign” version, introducing changes linked to the nation in question. It is clear to see that it is more difficult for an undifferentiated message to be perceived correctly by those belonging to a different culture compared with those belonging to the culture that created it; the culturally customized message aims to identify some distinctive elements of the different cultures upstream and insert them in the specific message for that target.

The last communicative method is more complex to implement, but is more strictly referred to as cross-cultural

philosophy. In cross-cultural communication, a single message is created that is capable of crossing various cultures and stresses their common elements in order to encompass all cultural targets. Table 1 explains this statement. Rather than culturally customized communication, the company can opt for a cross-cultural personalization, producing just one message “B,” which is based upon the cultural manifestations shared by the two target audiences, in other words expressions “a” and “d” (Table 2).

An example of cross-cultural communication is represented by Coca Cola’s “Applause” advertisement in Argentina and Italy, which is broadcast in the two countries with the only modification being the translation of the text from Spanish into Italian. The obvious difficulty lies in the study of different cultures present in a single country and in identifying common elements to be transferred to different targets using the same message. Consequently,

it is not merely creative difficulty nature but relates to the availability of researchers who are able to understand and recognize the different cultures. Moreover, the approach adopted by many companies often results in a kind of ethnocentricity. The research on a given culture is planned and led by people belonging to the same culture, who are often unaware of or misunderstand other cultures, and interpret the results only on the basis of their own norms and values.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Research Methodology Adopted**

For the empirical analysis a qualitative approach was chosen. This methodology is useful when the purpose of the research is to explain consumers’ attitudes and behavior, taking into consideration the underlying cognitive and emotional structures. To perform the research described in this article, three focus groups were conducted with groups of people of two different

**Table 2**  
**The Matrix of Cross-culturally Customized Communications (Adapted by Cavallone, 2007)**

	Undifferentiated Message	Culturally Customized Message
Residents in the foreign country (Cultural manifestations: “a,” “b,” “c,” “d”)	$A1 = f(\text{“b,” “c”})$	$B = f(\text{“a,” “d”})$
Residents in the country of origin (Cultural manifestations: “a,” “z,” “v,” “d”)	$A2 = f(\text{“z,” “v”})$	$B = f(\text{“a,” “d”})$

nationalities: American and Italian. Each work group consisted of 8 subjects aged between 19 and 22 who were heterogeneous from the point of view of gender but uniform from the socio-cultural point of view. The discussion groups, each lasting about 90 minutes, were conducted and moderated both in an “open” and a “semi-structured” way, according to the objectives that the research aimed to cover (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998). In particular, the outline of the discussion was based upon a demonstration of Hofstede’s theory which provides for four manifestations of culture: values, symbols, heroes and rituals (Trentini, 1995). The stimuli used during the discussion groups were selected television commercials.

After the presentation of the commercials, the following information was collected:

- assessment of the perceptions;
- list of the converging/diverging elements;

- opinions about how to modify the commercials to make them culturally acceptable (only for the Italians); and
- hypotheses concerning the modifications to make the commercial cross-cultural (only for the Italians).

The groups’ conversation was recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The analysis of the resulting material included both verbal and non-verbal aspects and was backed by a conversational analysis (Hutchby & Wooffit, 1998).

### **The Main Evidence Raised**

For each commercial shown, a description of the television commercial, a table comparing the perception of each ethnic group divided into the four descriptive variables of culture according to Hofstede (heroes, symbols, rituals and values), a brief comment on the convergence of the four drivers as well as the elements stated in the previous paragraph linked to

the acceptance, refusal, and/or fine tuning of the commercial is reported.

The commercials examined were

- Fiat 500 “Immigrants”;
- Fiat 500 “Abarth”;
- Barilla “Plus”; and
- Barilla “Perfect night,”

which concern, amongst others, some of the main sectors of Italian exports.

### **Fiat 500 “Immigrants” Commercial**

The commercial<sup>4</sup> is set against a characteristic landscape of Southern Italy and shows some colorful Fiat 500 cars speeding along narrow coastal roads. Once they reach the sea, they dive into the water accompanied by a traditional Neapolitan song in the background. The Fiat 500s re-emerge in New York and arrive in Manhattan where, on the notes of a rhythmic hip-hop song, they are admired by passers-by for

their unique style. The “**values**” that stood out for the Americans were family, adventure, fun, immigration, and happiness. Italian romanticism, which differs from those picked out by the Italians, were energy, versatility, Italian character, practicality, and light-heartedness. The Americans picked out various “**heroes**”: the fisherman, the cyclist, the

migrant, the bride and groom; the only “**hero**” that emerges for the Italian group is the Fiat 500 car. On the contrary, as far as the “**rituals**” are concerned, the Americans mentioned fishing, going to the beach, going for a boat ride, and immigrating; the Italians identified driving, getting married, going on holiday, and emigrating.

Finally, the “**symbols**” picked out by the Americans were the Statue of Liberty, Brooklyn bridge, the Fiat logo, the luxury car, New York and the bright colors of the Italian landscape; the Italians mention the soundtrack, the sea and the sun, the bride and groom, Brooklyn bridge, the colors, and the typical landscapes of Southern Italy.

**Table 3**  
**Cross-cultural Analysis of the Fiat 500 “Immigrants” Commercial**  
 (The **bold** elements represent the main convergences.)

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Energy</b> Family Adventure Fun Immigration Old world/New world Happiness Italian pride Italian romanticism Tenacity Marriage Youth Friendship Beauty Freedom Luxury Diversity Audacity Exploring Culture Resistance, sturdiness Humor Recklessness	<b>Energy</b> Versatility Italian character (always with you) Simplicity Adaptability Practicality Light-heartedness Cheerfulness Friendliness Uniqueness Mediterranean lifestyle



	Americans	Italians
<b>Heroes</b>	<b>The car</b> Fisherman Cyclist Immigrant The priest The bride and groom A romantic Italian town by the sea European waiter	<b>Fiat 500</b>
<b>Rituals</b>	<b>Immigration</b> <b>Marriage</b> <b>Driving in the Italian countryside</b> <b>Going to the beach</b> Culture of coffee Fishing Cycling Going for a boat ride Eating together Going shopping	<b>Immigration</b> <b>Marriage</b> <b>Driving</b> <b>Holidays</b> Attracting attention Going ashore
<b>Symbols</b>	<b>Brooklyn bridge</b> <b>Winding roads</b> <b>Bright colors</b> <b>Italian flag</b> <b>American city</b> Statue of Liberty European setting European waiter Castle Fiat car Luxury car Italian villa Beach Boats	<b>Brooklyn bridge</b> <b>Italian countryside</b> <b>Colors</b> <b>Italian flag</b> <b>American city</b> Emigration Location South Italy Bride and groom Sun Sea Song (Italian and American) Cyclist on the side of the road

### **Fiat 500 “Abarth” Commercial**

In the Fiat 500 Abarth<sup>5</sup> commercial, destined for the North American market and set in a city street on a pavement lined with a row of large cars, is an attractive girl who is adjusting her sandal in a provocative pose and a young office worker during his break who cannot take his

eyes off her. The girl turns to the boy and reproaches him in Italian for looking at her. The boy is totally captivated by the girl’s beauty, and, when she finally seems to show some signs of interest in him, he comes back to reality: instead of the girl, he finds himself in front of a Fiat 500 Abarth in black and red, the same colors as the girl’s dress. The

commercial ends with some driving sequences and an off-screen voice which says, “*The Fiat 500 Abarth—You’ll never forget the first time you see one.*” Comparing the results that emerged from the focus groups with Hofstede’s theory of cultural manifestations, it can be affirmed that both the American and the Italian interviewees pinpoint as

**“values”** appearance, beauty, and sensuality. The Americans also perceive those of style and luxury, while the Italians identify passion, both for a woman and for a car, power and energy, temptation and transgression. There is a convergence regarding the identification of the **“heroes”**; both groups identify the ordinary young man, who is nice but not particularly good-looking, in other words an “average man,” and the fascinating seductress. Under the heading **“rituals,”** both the American and the Italian interviewees identify drinking coffee, which has been defined and interpreted both as having a break and having breakfast. The second ritual pinpointed by both groups is that of seduction: the girl’s behavior has been interpreted as an attempt to seduce the male protagonist. The **“symbols”** mentioned are the scorpion tattooed on the girl’s neck and the Abarth logo together with the colors of the girl’s dress and the car (red and black), interpreted by both groups as a metaphor of passion, elegance, and mystery.

#### **Barilla “Plus” Commercial**

The commercial<sup>6</sup> begins with the image of a country house in the middle of the Italian hills. The family welcomes the aunt who has arrived from America and she, in turn, shows an interest in the presence of a good-looking neighbor. After hugging each other, the two sisters go into

the kitchen where the aunt is complimentary about the choice of pasta and underlines that Barilla plus is recommended for preparing a healthy dish of pasta for all the family. The commercial ends with the family around the table and the good-looking neighbor who says, “Perfetto,” after tasting the pasta, all against a background song sung by Andrea Bocelli. The opinions of the two groups interviewed about this commercial are similar. Under the heading **“values,”** both targets mentioned family, love, serenity, wholesomeness; as far as the **“heroes”** are concerned, the groups picked out the good-looking neighbor, the aunt, the family, the mother. The **“rituals”** identified are lunching together, cooking, hugging, eating healthily; the **“symbols”** recognized by the Italians and the Americans are the Barilla logo, the Italian countryside, and the family.

#### **Barilla “Perfect Night” Commercial**

This commercial<sup>7</sup> begins with the meeting between the two leading characters, a man and a woman, during an elegant party by the light of the moon. The candles, the moon reflecting in the water and the landscape make the setting very romantic. A third protagonist of the commercial is a plate of pasta that the young couple decide to share. The couple find themselves eating the same piece of

spaghetti which breaks, shattering the magic moment. The off-screen voice says: “Don’t ruin the moment. Pasta Barilla—always *al dente* for the perfect night.” The setting changes. The couple is now in the kitchen cooking a dish of Barilla spaghetti with cherry tomatoes and basil. The commercial ends with the two sweethearts sharing a piece of spaghetti, but this time drawing together in a kiss. “Volare” by Modugno is played as the background song. The **“values”** highlighted by the American group are relationships, attraction, romance, love, arousal, and joy; those of the Italian group are love, intimacy, complicity, elegance, quality, and romance. Several similarities between the two groups as far as the **“heroes”** are concerned are *Lady and the Tramp* (Walt Disney), the perfect couple, and pasta. The **“rituals”** identified by the Americans are the romantic dinner, cooking, watching TV, socialising, and seducing; for the Italians, they are the romantic dinner, the first date, the kiss, eating together, and the amorous evening. Under the heading **“symbols,”** for the American focus group the words moon, Barilla spaghetti, the kiss with the spaghetti, candles, and elegant party were mentioned; while, for the Italians, reference was made to Modugno’s song, spaghetti, pasta *al dente*, basil, the kiss with the same piece of spaghetti.

**Table 4**  
**Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Fiat 500 “Abarth” Commercial**  
(The **bold** elements represent the main convergences.)

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Appearance</b> <b>Sensuality</b> Style Luxury	<b>Beauty</b> <b>Sensuality</b> Passion for a woman and for a car Power, Performance, Energy Transgression, Temptation, Melodrama
<b>Heroes</b>	<b>“Average man” protagonist</b> <b>Fascinating woman</b>	<b>Ordinary man protagonist, a good boy</b> <b>Provocative woman, temptress,</b> <b>unattainable</b>
<b>Rituals</b>	<b>Coffee</b>  <b>Seduction</b> Average man who flirts with a fascinating woman	<b>Cappuccino, Coffee break, Breakfast</b> <b>Seduction</b>
<b>Symbols</b>	<b>Scorpion</b> <b>Colors of the dress (mystery, elegance, passion)</b> <b>Coffee</b>	<b>Scorpion</b> <b>Colors (elegance and passion)</b>  <b>Cappuccino</b> Fascinating and provocative woman Automatic gear Italian language

**Table 5**  
**Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Barilla “Plus” Commercial**  
(The **bold** elements represent the main convergences.)

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Family</b> <b>Love</b> <b>Joy</b> Health Relations Happiness Traditions Cooking Maternity Elegance Serenity Unity Home	<b>Family</b> <b>Love</b> <b>Cheerfulness</b> Company Love at first sight Friendship Complicity Getting on well together, sharing Conviviality Wholesomeness Italian character Union Uniqueness Happiness

<b>Heroes</b>	<b>Americans</b> <b>The neighbor</b> <b>Good-looking Italian boy</b> <b>The sister</b> The stranger The mother Friends	<b>Italians</b> <b>The good-looking neighbor</b>  <b>The aunt from America</b> Family Spaghetti
<b>Rituals</b>	<b>Dinner with the family</b> <b>Cooking together</b>  <b>Hugging</b> <b>Preparing a healthy meal</b> Holiday with the family Complimenting each other Visits from relations	<b>Having lunch together</b> <b>Cooking together</b> <b>Eating together</b> <b>Hugging</b> <b>Eating healthily</b> Cooking the pasta
<b>Symbols</b>	<b>Italian villa</b> <b>Tuscan countryside</b>  <b>Family</b> Barilla logo Field of wheat The kitchen The car	<b>Farmhouse</b> <b>Hills, Countryside</b> <b>Typical Italian landscape</b> <b>Family with Anglo-Saxon features</b> Bocelli's song Being happy to be with the family The good-looking neighbor Spaghetti

**Table 6**  
**Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Barilla “Perfect Night” Commercial**  
(The **bold** elements represent the main convergences.)

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Values</b>	<b>Elegance</b> <b>Romanticism</b> <b>Love</b> Relationships Attraction Spontaneity Fun Joy Sex Mystery Arousal Socialization	<b>Elegance</b> <b>Romanticism</b> <b>Love</b> Intimacy Complicity Sensuality Genuineness of real things Pasta al dente Shared passion Quality Italian character Sharing
<b>Heroes</b>	<b>The lovers</b> <b>The romantic couple</b> <b>Lady and the Tramp (Walt Disney)</b>  Good-looking man Entrepreneurs	<b>The perfect couple</b>  <i><b>Lady and the Tramp (Walt Disney)</b></i> Pasta

	Americans	Italians
<b>Rituals</b>	<b>Romantic dinner</b>  <b>Kissing</b> <b>Cooking</b> <b>Eating together</b> <b>Date</b> Watching TV Seducing Socializing Kiss with piece of spaghetti	<b>Romantic dinner for two people in love</b> <b>Final kiss</b> <b>Cooking</b> <b>Eating together</b> <b>First date</b> Dining at table Pasta, cherry tomatoes and basil Meeting at a party An amorous evening
<b>Symbols</b>	<b>Barilla spaghetti</b> <b>Kiss with a piece of spaghetti</b> <b>Basil</b> The moon Barilla Marinara sauce Candles Body language Cooking Off-screen voice with Italian accent Forks Black clothes Elegant party	<b>Spaghetti</b> <b>Kiss with a piece of spaghetti</b> <b>Basil</b> Modugno's song Male character with typically Mediterranean features Lady and the Tramp (Walt Disney) Pasta al dente Colours of the Italian flag

To sum up, it is possible to construct a hierarchy of the stimuli compared with the level of understanding and acceptability on the part of the various ethnic groups involved in the study. From the commercial with the highest level of cross-cultural understanding to the one which appears to be more specific for the American context, they can be placed in the following order:

- Fiat 500 “Abarth”
- Barilla “Plus”
- Fiat 500 “Immigrants”
- Barilla “Perfect night”

As Table 7 shows, for the Fiat 500 Abarth commercial, the analysis underlines many convergences: the symbols, rituals, heroes, and values pinpointed in most cases overlap and are, in general, acceptable. The element that led to some debate in the Italian group was the cultural acceptability of the seductive gestures made by the leading female character, which were considered normal for an advertisement and not at all offensive by the American counterpart.

With regard to the Barilla Plus commercial, when the Italian group was asked about the possibility of showing the commercial in Italy, it

emerged that it could work insofar as it recalls traditional Italian values of the family and eating a plate of pasta together at table (see Table 8). The only doubt concerned the Anglo-Saxon traits of the leading characters. To be effective in Italy, the commercial would have to use actors with more Mediterranean features.

For the “Immigrants” advertisement, from the focus groups it emerges that the Americans are fascinated by the first part and see Italy as a faraway place where they could spend their holidays. The Italians were struck by the advertisement, but do not

**Table 7**  
**Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Fiat 500 “Abarth” Commercial**  
**(Main Convergences)**

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Values</b>	Appearance Sensuality	Beauty Sensuality
<b>Heroes</b>	“Average man” protagonist Fascinating woman	Ordinary man protagonist, a good boy Provocative woman, temptress, unattainable
<b>Rituals</b>	Coffee Seduction	Cappuccino, Coffee break, Breakfast Seduction
<b>Symbols</b>	Scorpion Colours of the dress (mystery, elegance, passion) Coffee	Scorpion Colours (elegance and passion)  Cappuccino

**Table 8**  
**Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Barilla “Plus” commercial**  
**(Main Convergences)**

	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>Value</b>	Family Love Joy	Family Love Cheerfulness
<b>Heroes</b>	The neighbor Good-looking Italian boy The sister	The good-looking neighbor   <u>The aunt from America</u>
<b>Rituals</b>	Dinner with the family Cooking together	Having lunch together Cooking together Eating together Hugging Eating healthily
<b>Symbols</b>	Italian villa Tuscan countryside  Family	Farmhouse Hills, Countryside Typical Italian landscape Family with Anglo-Saxon features

think that it would work in Italy because the last part reminds viewers of a sort of escape from the “Bel Paese.” Despite the convergences of the “Perfect Night” commercial by Barilla, for the Italian public the situation is

rather improbable, as they are used to eating spaghetti more with the family and friends rather than on formal or romantic occasions.

Table 9 just shows all the convergences that emerged from the comparisons with the

two targets. Apart from the observations made in the comments concerning the Tables 7 and 8, this summary table highlights the fact that the “values” box of the Fiat 500 “Immigrants” commercial has been left empty for both

targets confirming that it is not completely transferable. As far as the Barilla “perfect night” commercial is concerned, although convergences were noted in all four elements, the extensive interviews with the Italian target highlighted that, for the Italian public, the situation portrayed in the commercial is rather improbable.

The issues examined until now have led to a new conclusion that at first may appear incompatible with the statements made on the previous pages. In fact, the author considered standardization and adaptation as dichotomous and chose the latter to communicate effectively in the foreign country following the approach presented in the paper. What sometimes happens is that, a path of cross-cultural communication is followed, the possibility of a “return” standardization presents itself, which is linked to the fact that the efforts for cultural and cross-cultural adaptation made upstream may be accepted by a different target from the one for which they were actually created, leading to an economic benefit for the company. This is the case of the Fiat 500 Abarth commercial. Devising a specific communication for the American market enabled it to be effective for that country; the subsequent cultural and cross-cultural assessment made by the focus group in Italy confirmed the convergence of some elements

shown in the advertisement making the commercial suitable for use in another country with an evident benefit linked to the fact that the commercial has already been produced and the changes needed may be limited just to a modification/translation of the commentary. In fact, this has occurred in Italy where the same advertisement has been shown to advertise the Fiat 500S. This leads to the concept of the positive cycle of culturally customized communication or “return” standardization shown in Figure 1.

The diagram begins with the choice of adapting the message according to the specific requirements of the foreign market taken into consideration (1. Adaptation) which, apart from the aspects linked to the language, also takes into consideration elements such as the culture of the country (2. Cultural adaptation). From an assessment of the convergences and divergences between the different cultures (3. Fit between different cultures), cross-cultural adaptation is reached (4), which, with fine tuning linked to the language of the country, leads to return standardization (5).

### **Implications for Management**

The results of the research highlight some implications for management. Since 1991, Hofstede has been tracing a sort of pathway for managers

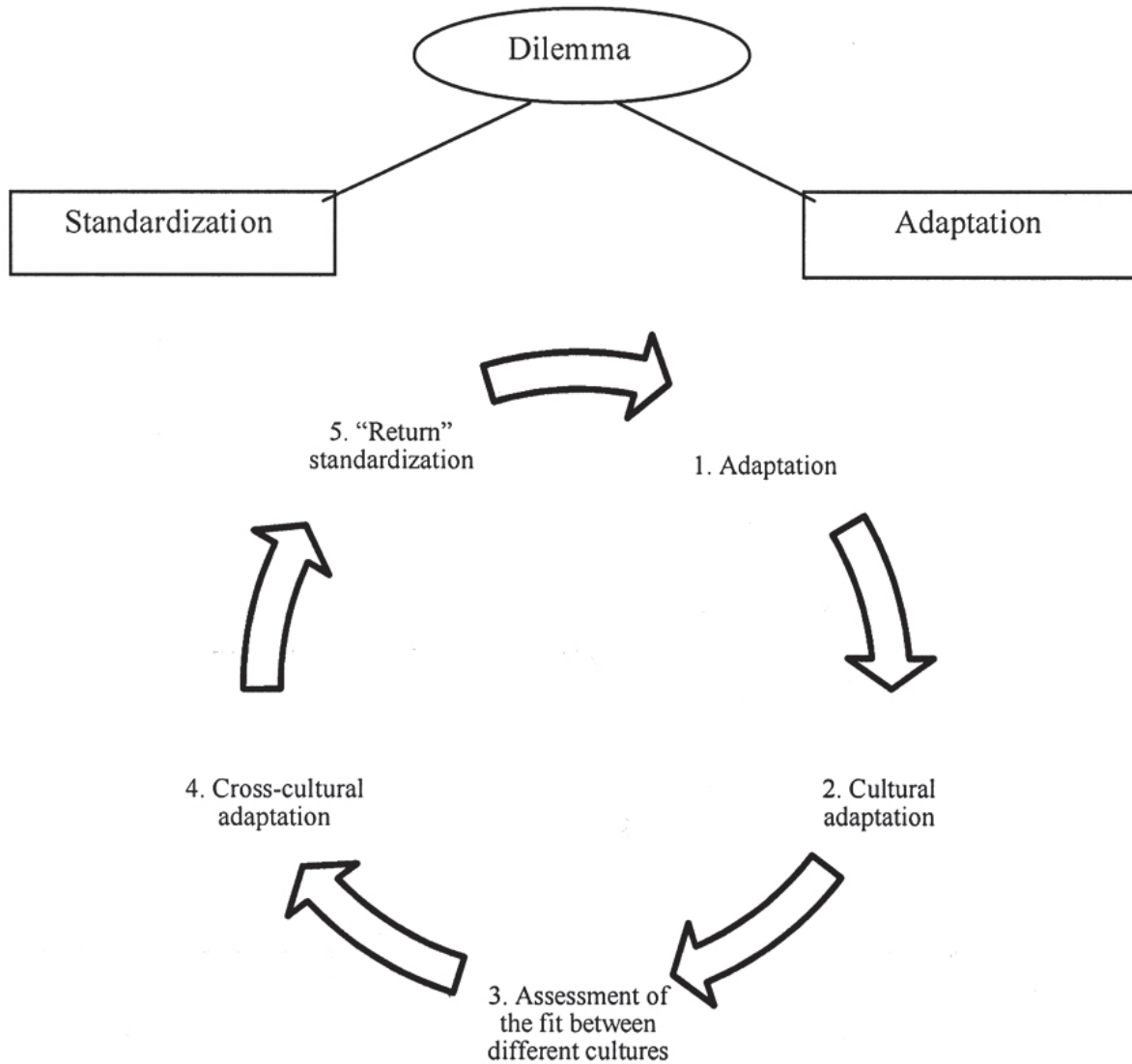
and affirms that “the acquisition of intercultural communication skills occurs in three phases: awareness, knowledge and ability,” (Hofstede, 1991). According to the author, the three elements constituting such expected behaviors refer firstly to the recognition of the existence of different cultures, followed by the phase of acceptance of the diversities, and concludes with the desire to modify communications and behaviors. In other words, when referring to the heading “modify,” the opportunity of being able to create messages that are culturally acceptable immediately to various ethnic groups present in the country at the same time comes to mind. Visconti and Napolitano (2008) identify in transculturalism and in intercultural marketing the approach that marketing must take in order to pinpoint strategies “suitable for working on elements shared by several ethnic-national groups.” Managers must, therefore, recognize “upstream” if they can use a standardized type of advertising in several countries or if they need to modify it in order to reflect the local languages and cultures, bearing in mind that the appeal can be interpreted differently by people with a different cultural background. If carefully assessed cultural and cross-cultural adaptation is chosen, it seems clear that economic savings can be made

**Table 9**  
**Cross Culturally Shared Elements**

	<b>Fiat 500</b>	<b>Abarth</b>	<b>Barilla</b>	<b>Plus</b>	<b>Fiat 500</b>	<b>Immigrants</b>	<b>Barilla</b>	<b>Perfect night</b>
<b>S</b>	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>	<b>Americans</b>	<b>Italians</b>
<b>H</b>	<b>V</b> Appearance	Beauty	Family	Family	Energy	Energy	Elegance	Elegance
	<b>A</b> Sensuality	Sensuality	Love	Love		Versatility	Romanticism	Romanticism
	<b>L</b>		Joy	Cheerfulness			Love	Love
<b>A</b>	<b>H</b> “Average	Ordinary	The	The good-			The lovers	The perfect
	<b>E</b> man”	man	neighbor	looking			The romantic	couple
	<b>R</b> protagonist	protagonist,	Good-	neighbor			couple	
	<b>O</b> Fascinating	a good boy	looking				Lady and the	Lady and the
	<b>E</b> woman	Provocative	Italian boy	The aunt			Tramp (Walt	Tramp (Walt
	<b>S</b>	woman,	The sister	from America			Disney)	Disney)
		temptress,						
		unattainable						
<b>R</b>	<b>R</b> Coffee	Cappuccino,	Dinner	Having	Immigration	Immigration	Romantic	Romantic
	<b>I</b>	Coffee	with the	lunch	Marriage	Marriage	dinner	dinner for
	<b>T</b>	break,	family	together	Driving in	Driving		two people in
	<b>U</b>	Breakfast	Cooking	Cooking	the Italian	Holidays	Kissing	love
	<b>A</b> Seduction	Seduction	together	together	countryside		Cooking	Final kiss
	<b>L</b>			Eating	Going to the		Eating	Cooking
	<b>S</b>		Hugging	together	beach		together	Eating
			Preparing	Hugging			Date	together
			a healthy	Eating				First date
			meal	healthily				
<b>E</b>	<b>S</b> Scorpion	Scorpion	Italian villa	Farmhouse	Brooklyn	Brooklyn	Barilla	Spaghetti
	<b>Y</b> Colours of	Colours	Tuscan	Hills,	bridge	bridge	spaghetti	Kiss with a
	<b>M</b> the dress	(elegance	countryside	Countryside	Winding	Italian	Kiss with a	piece of
	<b>B</b> (mystery,	and passion)		Typical	roads	countryside	piece of	spaghetti
	<b>O</b> elegance,		Family	Italian	Bright	Colours	spaghetti	Basil
	<b>L</b> passion)			landscape	colours	Italian flag	Basil	
	<b>S</b> Coffee	Cappuccino		Family with	Italian flag	American		
				Anglo-Saxon	city	city		
				features				
<b>D</b>								



**Figure 1**  
**The Positive Cycle of Culturally Customized Communication**



deriving from the possibility of spreading the advertising message from one country to another just with a simple translation. In fact the assessment of the cultural fit allows companies to benefit from cost advantages deriving from the use of the same

commercial with a simple translation which here becomes the point of arrival and not the point of departure in communication strategy.

This is also confirmed by the literature (Cavusgil, Zou, & Naidu, 1993; Samiee & Roth, 1992; Szymanski, Bharadwaj,

& Varadarajan, 1993), which highlights “links between a firm’s adaptation strategy in its international marketing program and the firm’s performance” (Albaum & Tse, 2001: 59).

## Conclusions and Limitations of the Research

In the author's opinion, the first step toward addressing the technical and communications needs of those dealing with foreign markets is to start from the adaptation of communication. Cultural adaptation represents the extra step that enables the created product to be re-used once it has been proven acceptable to other ethnic groups/countries. At least two economic benefits are linked with this type of attitude: firstly, the costs incurred to adapt a commercial are lower than those in the case of an incomplete acceptance of the standard message, to which the figurative costs must be added linked with the damage to the company's image as well as those for making a new advertising message. The second benefit arises as a result of the positive cycle of cross-culturally customized communication, in other words, what has been defined as return standardization, which enables a message created for a specific country to be used in another country as well. In this case, the fine tuning may be limited just to the translation of the text, which radically changes the concept of standardization that becomes a point of arrival and not a point of departure of communication strategy.

The limitations of this work derive from the fact that the focus groups were only

conducted in two countries, the United States and Italy and only two sectors, food and cars, were considered. Both the variables will be subject to further research in the future to assess the extendibility of the concepts mentioned briefly in Figure 1. A further limitation is linked to whether the messages identified as being cross-culturally acceptable (e.g., Fiat 500 Abarth and at least partially Barilla Plus) are actually broadcast in another country: this represents the real actualization of the process that the author undertakes to accomplish by contacting the two companies considered in the research. In fact, this has already happened with the Fiat 500 Abarth commercial, which has also been shown in Italy. When these latter elements have been confirmed, the standardization-adaptation dilemma will no longer be a dichotomous doubt because from adaptation, it will be possible to achieve "return" standardization.

## Endnotes

1. Between 1995 and 2006, 106 articles were published on this subject in the most important international marketing magazines.

2. According to Limon, Kahale, and Orth,

[i]nternal values imply that the person believes that he or she can control value fulfilment; internal

value facets include self-fulfilment, self-respect, and accomplishment. Internally oriented people strive for control of their life outcomes and believe that their success is due only to their own efforts and achievements. In contrast, external values emphasize fulfilment beyond the control of the individual person and are characterized by attributes such as being well respected, security, a sense of belonging, and warm relationships with others. Externally oriented people do not closely link their actions to outcomes because they tend to believe that events are influenced through external sources, specifically other people. The last dimension, fun and enjoyment values, includes the facets of excitement, fun, and enjoyment. People who greatly value fun and enjoyment hold elements of both external and internal values because they can experience fun either through interaction with other people or by themselves (2009: 33).

3. Costa's view:

today, the great part of publications on cross-cultural marketing and the behavior of the consumer is ethnocentric and methodologically weak. Ethnocentric

studies are research on a culture shaped and conducted by people belonging to this culture. If they know little of other cultures they assume the existence of similarities between industrialized countries and consider culture a constant; the results are interpreted and discussed with regard to the norms, values and dominant processes of the researchers and are considered universal. To get beyond these limits researchers are beginning to elaborate theories relevant to their culture in other cultures with the aim of expanding the power of the theory, individuating similarities and differences between cultural conditions, extend the range of independent variables and their effects on the dependent variables involved (1995).

4. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XKUrYf1z9Bg>

5. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fMjavRu4v5c>

6. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgO\\_YhAPYdE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgO_YhAPYdE)

7. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ajO-uacZ1Ro>

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